

**CONFRONTING UNCLEANNESS  
ILLUMINATIONS OF SAINT MARK**

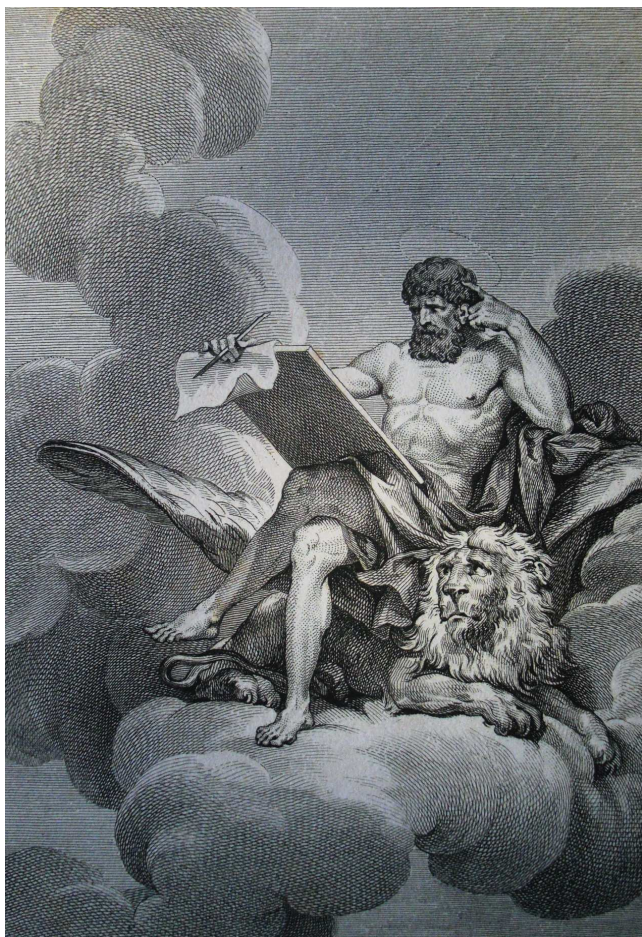
**BY**

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For Robert Medhurst 1944-2012

Cover photograph: detail of "the Crucifixion" by Rubens



MARK THE EVANGELIST. FRENCH SCHOOL





## INTRODUCTION

The first Christians worshipped in the Temple and the synagogue with their fellow Jews. Then they started to proclaim Jesus as the Messiah. Their message would have been something like this:

"God has demonstrated that Jesus of Nazareth is His Chosen One by raising him from the dead. The New Age is about to dawn. Repent, believe, and receive the Holy Spirit so that you may be saved when God comes to judge the earth - as he will very soon."

The response of their Jewish audience was: "Prove it!"

So these earliest Christians turned to their Bible - the Jewish Bible - and to the prophecies of Isaiah and others and said, "Jesus has made these prophecies come true!" So the proof of the Messiahship of Jesus consisted of extracts from what was now the "Old" Testament, and the followers of Peter, James and John - the Petrine Party - used them as the basis for their preaching. But soon the "Christians" came to be ejected from the synagogues. Then an increasing number of non-Jews, who had no familiarity with the Old Testament, joined this community of believers. So the Petrine Church relied more and more on what Peter and his associates told it about the new relationship with God which they said was now possible.

Imagine a gathering in a believer's house. Many of those present are Gentiles. They say, "We believe in Jesus. Tell us all about him, Peter - you knew him. Tell us a story about Jesus!"

Peter says, "Alright. Once upon a time when I was by Lake Galilee with Jesus, he . . . . ."

At the end of the story someone says, "Peter, I've got this problem with my wife. What did Jesus advise about . . . . ?"

"Ah yes," says Peter, "I remember it well because he made us learn this off-by-heart. I think Jesus was talking about this particular problem when he said: '. . . . .'" And so, as well as *kerygma* (proclamation), *didache* (teaching) was passed on by word of mouth, but not with any record of the context in which Jesus said it, and perhaps with little indication of which

were the words actually spoken by Jesus, and which were words of interpretation added by Peter and those of his Party.

Not long after Jesus' death the disciples began to age, and by A.D. 60 Peter would have been in his sixties - an advanced age when life expectancy was not so great. Perhaps the memories of him and his friends were slipping a little. Perhaps they were sick. When in A.D.64 Nero decided to start persecuting Christians he hunted down the leaders - people like Peter. So the Petrine Apostles were being wiped out. The days when you could actually find an Apostle and ask him to tell you a story were receding fast. Somebody had to write down their reminiscences as a matter of urgency.

The majority of people in the ancient world could not read or write. The privileged few who received an education used to learn, for example, the whole of Homer's "Iliad" off-by-heart, in Greek, whether they spoke Greek or not. No doubt there were many Jews who had learnt a substantial portion of the "Torah" off by heart, together with the oral tradition that went with it which, at the time of Jesus, had never been written down. They had well-trained memories. While we tend to regard information not written down as not reliable, our ancestors were not so book-centred. They lived in an "oral culture". Rabbis would gather their disciples around them and say: "This is my teaching. Repeat after me: . . ." Some scholars have found there are signs in the sayings of Jesus of a poetic structure of the kind which is used in "mnemonics". In English rhyme and metre make the mnemonics memorable; in Semitic languages the technique is "parallelism": the same point is repeated in a different form. We see this in *Mark*:

"some of it fell along the path . . . . .  
Some of it fell on rocky ground. . . . .  
Some of the seed fell among thorn bushes . . . . .  
some seeds fell in good soil. . . . ."  
(*Mark* 4: 3- 8)

"if your hand makes you lose your faith, cut it off! . . .  
if your foot makes you lose your faith, cut it off! . . .  
if your eye makes you lose your faith, take it out! . . ."  
(*Mark* 9:43-8)

Many traces of such techniques have probably been lost in the translation and editing of Jesus's spoken Aramaic into the written Greek.

Because of the oral culture, the teaching of Jesus in the Gospels is probably what Jesus actually said. The problem for Mark was that he did not know when Jesus actually said it. We can see the joins where Mark has put scraps of teaching together. We often find ourselves thinking, "That doesn't seem to follow on very well." But when it comes to what Jesus did, the issue of historical truth becomes a very real problem. Where did the person who put Mark's Gospel together get his information? Even if it did derive ultimately from somebody like Peter, this one disciple was not there all the time with Jesus, every moment of the day. And even if he did see everything, we only have his version. To what extent is Peter's version (if that is the version) coloured by his own beliefs about Jesus, particularly in a culture which had little conception of historical accuracy?

The earliest testimony we have concerning the formation of Mark's Gospel is that of Papias. He was a bishop who lived in Asia Minor in the 2nd century A.D. His works are mentioned by Eusebius of Caesarea, the first "official" historian of the Church who wrote early in the 4th century. Although the works of Papias (apparently commentaries on the sayings of Jesus) are now lost, Eusebius quotes from them. Writing some sixty years after Mark's Gospel was put together, we find Papias saying that Peter "adapted his teachings to the needs of the moment and did not make an ordered exposition of the sayings of the Lord." He says about Mark that "he made it his special care to omit nothing of what he heard, and to make no false statement therein." He also wrote that he himself had been told that "Mark became the interpreter of Peter and he wrote down accurately, but not in order, as much as he remembered of the sayings and doings of Christ." He also said that Mark had no personal contact with Jesus during his earthly ministry. But Papias himself was writing in the second century. There is no way of knowing how reliable his information is. "Mark", the supposed author, has a very common name. There is a Mark mentioned in some of the letters of Paul, in a letter by Peter, and in "The Acts of the Apostles". If the author of the Gospel is this same John Mark then we know he was the cousin of Barnabas, and his mother, called Mary, had a house in Jerusalem where the early Christians used to meet (*Acts* 12:12).



**PETER REPENTANT. ARTIST UNKNOWN**

This, then, is a version of what happened: Mark, who had never met Jesus himself face to face during his earthly ministry, had a very good source: Simon Peter. Peter was in Rome. For some reason the Apostle was facing death, either because of old age or of impending execution, and therefore Mark got him to recount his experiences as he wrote them down. He did this while the persecution of the Church had started under Nero about A.D. 64. Hence Mark's readers may have found stories like "The Calming of the Storm" (*Mark* 4:35-41) reassuring. Peter himself had weakened; but now, facing death, he was saying how you should trust in Jesus.

Chapter 13 of Mark's Gospel may contain a historical marker. If it is referring to actual events, then perhaps Mark was writing after the Jewish revolt had begun round about A.D. 66, but before the Temple had actually been destroyed. Perhaps Mark is saying, "First Jerusalem, then the world. If God allows his Holy Temple to be destroyed, which is the holiest place on earth, and He has allowed His Son to be crucified, surely any day now we're going to see the End." Perhaps the Jerusalem Church had fled to Galilee and was awaiting the re-appearance of Jesus while enduring the period of disaster preceding the End. The absence of resurrection-appearances could be deliberate: the instruction to the disciples to go to Galilee to await the Second Coming could reflect the flight of the Jerusalem Church in 66 A.D.

The Gospel according to Mark is, for Christians, "Holy Scripture". When they want to find guidance, the faithful may invoke God the Holy Spirit directly, but they also believe the Spirit may work through the pages of Scripture. The Gospels are regarded as "the Word of God". But this "Word of God" did not fall out of the sky: it was written down by human beings, and as soon as fallible intermediaries become involved problems occur.

The problem of scriptural inspiration can be avoided by cutting out "the middle man". Moslems speak with great confidence when they want to find out God's will, because it is set out in "The Koran". They believe that Mohammed heard the Word of God directly in Arabic. The Prophet could not write so he went to his friends and told them what he had heard word for word. Then they wrote it down. "The Koran" is *literally* "the Word of God".

The Jews at the time of Jesus had a very similar idea about the "Torah", the laws and regulations in the first five books of the Old Testament (the so-called "Books of Moses"). While they believed that Moses played a very important part in fetching them, and writing them down, these books were actually "the Word of God". They also claimed that there were explanations of the laws which went right back to Moses even if they were passed on by word of mouth. These explanations, they claimed, were almost as authoritative as the Law itself because Moses was very close to God: he had met Yahweh at the top of Mount Sinai, when he collected the laws. (Some of these interpretations have passed into modern Judaism. Thus the Jews' separation of dairy products from meat products, and their use of different pots and pans and even different parts of the kitchen, and their prohibition of dairy and meat products in the same meal, goes back to one verse which says "Do not cook a young sheep or goat in its mother's milk", *Exodus* 23:19, repeated in 34:26.) But it was not open to *any* person to say, "This Law means this," or, "It means that". It was his insistence on giving authoritative interpretations which brought Jesus into conflict with the powers-that-were.

When human intermediaries become involved the message may be in danger of being distorted because of human error. That is the situation with the Christian Bible. Believers deal with the problem by claiming that, although the Bible was written by human beings, they were inspired by God the Holy Spirit when they wrote it down. A painting by Caravaggio shows one of the Evangelists as a rough peasant. ("The Inspiration of Saint Matthew", painted 1601-2, destroyed in 1945, formerly in the Kaiser Friedrich Museum, Berlin.) He looks illiterate. He has hard, work-worn hands. He is clutching a quill, and he looks unfamiliar with the use of it. But leaning elegantly over his shoulder is an angel who looks very refined and educated, and whose hand is over that of the Evangelist, guiding it across the page. That is how the Church used to picture Biblical inspiration. The Evangelists were only pens in the hand of God.

There are still fundamentalist Petrine Christians who have a very literal understanding of what is meant by "the Word of God". The difficulties of this position are illustrated by the *cause célèbre* of Jehovah's Witnesses. Nowhere in the Bible does it say "Thou shalt not have a blood transfusion". Prohibition of this life-saving procedure is based on verses which disallow

the drinking of the blood of sacrificed animals. (The prohibition is explained at length in chapter 17 of *Leviticus*.) This shows that the interpretation of Scripture can be a life-and-death issue. At the other end of the spectrum, a commentator can be agnostic about the claim, promoted by Mark himself, that Jesus was the "Messiah" and "Son of God". The chief value of the miracles may be seen, not as authenticating suspensions of the laws of nature, but in their symbolic significance as expressed through resonances with the Jewish Scriptures, or through their implied comment on the religious attitudes and practices of the time. Few would, in fact, devote much detailed attention to the text without believing that the message embodied in the life and death of Jesus has a unique and universal value. I believe that Jesus' chief value as preacher and thaumaturge resides in the fact that he confronted a Judaism which defined itself by exclusion: of those unable to keep the Law, or of those who were ritually impure. Coming from a cosmopolitan area which looked to the prophetic rather than Temple tradition, the Nazarene summoned Israel towards a redefinition of itself which transcended these inflexible barriers. The key to inclusion was repentance of individual sin and entry to a Kingdom where spiritual purity was not related to external physical circumstances. This radical message still raises difficult questions regarding the nature of "the True God" in relation to the God worshipped at that time by many Jews, and the world which he allegedly created. The answers involve theological speculation of a profundity which was beyond the apostles. Mark's Gospel is the product of their attempt to place the ministry of Jesus within the Jewish mythological and ethical framework which they had inherited and which they believed to be a repository of absolute truth. The message, once liberated from these distortions, sustains a compelling challenge to our world today. But in order to recover it, we need to peel away more than one layer of interpretation. First of all, we have the editorial interpretation of Mark himself, as he attempts to place his material in a narrative and thematic framework. Secondly, and much more difficult to deal with, we have the interpretation of the Jesus-phenomenon by the apostles. And thirdly, we have the cultural and religious presuppositions of Jesus himself. Beyond all this, we find - however obscurely - the rare phenomenon of a man who was ruled by conscience, or by the Truth as he understood it, whatever the consequences for himself. It is this which makes the quest worthwhile.



**JOHN THE BAPTIST PREACHING. STOTHARD**



## THE PRELUDE. MARK 1:1-13

The first words of the Gospel are: "This is the gospel." The word "gospel" is from the Old English "god spel", which means "good speech" or "good news". It is a literal translation of the Greek "eu angelion".

The Gospel begins by telling us what the book is about. Mark is not writing a biography. He is not writing history as we understand it, where the historian sets out the facts before inviting us to reach the same interpretation of events as himself. He is in fact announcing that a man called Jesus, is the "anointed one" (Greek "Christ", Hebrew "Messiah") promised by the Jewish scriptures, and everything he writes is aimed at verifying this assertion. The "facts" which he sets out are not subject to objective scrutiny: they simply reinforce a foregone conclusion.

Mark is announcing the Good News about Jesus *Christ* - not Jesus the son of Joseph. The title "Christ" is a Greek translation of the Hebrew term "Messiah" which means "Anointed". It is a royal title, like "His Majesty". So Mark is saying, "This is about Jesus the Christ, the Anointed One, the Messiah, the One promised in the (Hebrew) Scriptures as He Who will come and be a Great King in the line of David." Mark believes that Jesus of Nazareth was this promised Messiah. He is not just saying, "There was this man called Jesus. I want to write all the facts I could find about him because he claimed to be the Messiah and I thought that was rather interesting. If I compile as many facts as I can, perhaps you could make up your mind whether you think he really is the Messiah. Personally I'm going to remain completely impartial about this one." Rather, his stance is: "This man is the Messiah. Listen to this! It could change your life! It is GOOD NEWS!

Mark goes further: it is the gospel of "Jesus Christ *the Son of God*". We do not know whether Mark believed that Jesus was literally God's son: that is, that God was his "father", and Mary was his mother. Luke appears to believe this, but Mark does not give us any stories about Jesus's birth. He goes straight into his account of John the Baptist and Jesus being baptised. There is no information whatsoever about Jesus's life before the age of about thirty. In fact, the term "son of God" is used in the Old Testament. God is pictured in *Psalms* 2 as addressing the king of Israel as his "son". Mark probably borrowed this

message from the Psalms, believing that the verses applied to the Messiah. Without any shadow of a doubt, Mark believed that Jesus and the events surrounding him fulfilled the prophecies. The words quoted at the beginning of the Gospel are a compound from three places in the Old Testament - *Exodus* 23:20; *Malachi* 3:1 and *Isaiah* 40:3. The first part is taken from a passage in which God promises to send His angel to guide His people to the promised land: "I will send an angel ahead of you to protect you as you travel and to bring you to the place which I have prepared." In the Old Testament itself the Exodus from Egypt was seen as the pattern for God's future acts of redemption. The second part of the quotation (*Malachi* 3:1) itself echoes the language of *Exodus* as the prophet Malachi speaks of the coming of the Lord in judgment preceded by His messenger: "The Lord Almighty answers, 'I will send my messenger to prepare the way for me.'" The combination of this verse with *Malachi* 4:5 suggested that this messenger would be a second Elijah: "But before the great and terrible day of the Lord comes, I will send you the prophet Elijah." The Jews believed that before the Messiah came, Elijah - the honoured prophet who lived about a thousand years before Christ - would appear on earth. Mark's belief is that John the Baptist is Elijah. (Jews still, when they celebrate the Passover, put a cup of wine on the table for Elijah and leave the door open, just in case he happens to re-appear before the final Redemption.) Finally, *Isaiah* 40:3 summons captive Israel to prepare a way for the Lord in the desert along which He will lead them to salvation: "A voice cries out, 'Prepare in the wilderness a road for the Lord! Clear the way in the desert for our God!'" It was the purpose of John the Baptist, according to the way this quotation is used, to prepare the way for Jesus the Messiah.

Mark tells us nothing about the origins of this man. Luke says that he was a cousin of Jesus, but if Mark was writing earlier, how reliable is Luke's information? John was dressed like a wild man, obviously living off the land, eating what he could find, dressed in rough clothing. The locusts may well have been the beans of the locust or carob tree, which were used as animal fodder. In appearance John resembled Elijah: "What did the man look like?" the king asked. 'He was wearing a cloak made of animal skins, tied with a leather belt,' they answered. 'It's Elijah!' the king exclaimed." (2 *Kings* 1:8) In both dress and diet there is a suggestion that, like the Israelites before entering the Promised Land, John is entirely dependent on God's

Providence. Elijah was the original prophet of social justice: for example, in the incident of Naboth's vineyard, he condemned the greed and injustice of Ahab and Jezebel and their terrible treatment of Naboth (1 *Kings* 21). John was telling the people around Jerusalem to repent. (Note that this is not where Jesus came from: he began his ministry on his "home patch" in the north of the country.) John was preaching to "the establishment". These were the people who needed to change their ways if they were to avoid the wrath to come.

Ritual washing featured in the Temple ceremonies as a way of removing religious impurity, and we know that the sect who wrote the Dead Sea scrolls (possibly the "Essenes" mentioned by Josephus, an ancient Jewish historian) practised this ritual washing as part of their everyday routine. Perhaps John's adaptation of this rite of purification to fit in with Messianic expectations was a self-conscious imitation of a prophetic rather than priestly version: Elisha's "washing" of Naaman the Syrian, who was a leper as well as a foreigner (2 *Kings* 5). John's aim may have been to find a way of including people in the Kingdom who had no credentials in the eyes of the Jerusalem establishment, either because of their mixed blood or their infirmities. The condition of entry was a life of moral goodness, rather than a reversal (perhaps prompted by costly sacrifices) in a condition supposedly imposed by God as a punishment for sin. John's baptism only dealt with the past, giving a "clean slate". The Messiah would propel the repentant into the future, with a baptism of the Holy Spirit.

Jesus came down from Galilee. There was no reason to have expected a Messiah to emanate from here. Judaea was the "pure" and "orthodox" end of the country in terms of nationality, race and religion – its population had not suffered the same degree of racial intermixture from invasions and deportations as the north. Although it would be unreasonable to doubt that Jesus came from Galilee, there is no evidence that a town called "Nazareth" actually existed at this time, and the name may be a corruption of an adjective or nickname applied to Jesus and his disciples. A dove was a symbol of peace because after the Flood Noah sent one out and it came back with an olive-branch in its beak, a sign that God was no longer angry with the human race. A dove was also a poor man's sacrifice. Anyone who wanted to offer a sacrifice to God and who could not afford a goat or a bull or something expensive could buy a pigeon or dove. So it may have become a symbol



CHRIST BAPTIZED. RYLEY

for the humble man's bridge to God. There is another possible explanation. In the Temple rites a released dove (like the scapegoat) was believed to carry ritual uncleanness away with it (*Leviticus* 14:7). By having the dove return to Jesus after the baptism of John the earliest Christians were perhaps declaring that Jesus was able to receive the sins and bear them himself. In this way the Gospel begins Jesus' ministry by looking forward to his sacrifice on the cross. This peculiar incident tells us more about the beliefs of the early Church concerning the Nazarene rather than about any historical event on the banks of the Jordan; after all, who would have been able to recount a vision which allegedly took place in the mind of Jesus?

In the voice came from heaven we get a clear indication from God that this man from Nazareth is God's Chosen One. It combines two texts. In *Psalms* 2:7 God addresses the newly-anointed king as His Son: "I will announce," says the king, 'what the Lord has declared. He said to me, "You are my son; today I have become your father."' In *Isaiah* 42:1 God addresses His "Suffering Servant": "The Lord says, 'Here is my servant, whom I strengthen - the one I have chosen, with whom I am pleased. I have filled him with my spirit, and he will bring justice to every nation.'" The baptism is the first occasion on which the "voice from heaven" is heard. The second time is at *Mark* 9:7, during the Transfiguration. God is depicted as happy with the situation, so Jesus can start his ministry.

Mark gives no detailed account of the Temptations. We have to go to *Luke* 4 and *Matthew* 4 for a fuller account. These two evangelists were using a written document which Mark did not possess. It no longer exists independently. In their attempts to reconstruct it from the material common to *Matthew* and *Luke* scholars have called it "Q" from the German word "Quelle", meaning "source" or "spring".

The "forty days" are perhaps parallel to the forty years of Israel's journeyings in the wilderness: "Remember how the Lord your God led you on this long journey through the desert these past forty years, sending hardships to test you, so that he might know what you intended to do and whether you would obey his commandments." (*Deuteronomy* 8:2) The Israelites were being punished because of their disobedience to Yahweh - Jesus show instead complete obedience, leading us

to the implicit idea that Jesus is acting on behalf of Israel, and putting things right with God on their behalf. The forty days may also remind us of the forty days of Elijah's journey to Mount Horeb where he received his commission for the cleansing of an Israel which had turned to false gods. As in the case of Elijah, angels are sent to minister to Jesus before his coming trials (*1 Kings* 19:5-8). It is no accident that this number has passed into Christian devotional practice: Lent is a period of forty days.

It is not unreasonable to accept that Jesus underwent a period of preparation for his ministry – perhaps even with a community who lived in the desert, such as the Essenes. The community would have subsequently faded into the background either in the wake of Jesus's disgrace and execution, or because the early Church wished to emphasise Jesus's autonomy as the Son of God.

#### **JESUS GOES PUBLIC. MARK 1:14-20**

What is "the gospel"? Mark tells us quite clearly very early on: the Good News that Jesus is bringing is, "The right time has come. The Kingdom of God is near." Mark talks about "the Kingdom of God"; Matthew calls it "the Kingdom of Heaven". The Jews cherished the hope that one day God would act visibly to set up His kingly rule. The annunciation of its coming was therefore truly a piece of good news: "How wonderful it is to see a messenger coming across the mountains, bringing good news, the news of peace! He announces victory and says to Zion, 'Your God is king!'" (*Isaiah* 52:7) The message now was that the time of waiting and expectation had ended and the Kingdom of God had drawn near as predicted by the prophets: "Then the one who had been living for ever came and pronounced judgment in favour of the people of the Supreme God. The time had arrived for God's people to receive royal power." (*Daniel* 7:22)

The Good News of the Kingdom, in the understanding of Mark, is not just something that Jesus announces; he brings it into being by his actions. The Kingdom means God coming to the world and arranging things according to how He wants them, not how Satan wants them. The process which Christ began is still being worked out: this is why Christians pray in the Lord's Prayer, "Thy Kingdom come", which, according to Matthew's gloss, means "Thy will be done on earth as it is in

heaven". For some reason things are not as God wants them in the world. He does not want there to be suffering, He does not want there to be death, He does not want people to behave hatefully to one another. So Jesus has come along, has demonstrated what God wants, and at the same time has said that those who are delivered from these evils are part of God's promise that He is going to make a better world. That is the "good news": the Kingdom of God is near. But in order for God's will to come to fruition in the world, human beings have got to play their part. It is not just a matter of changing the circuits of the robot, so that we will all start behaving according to the moral laws laid down by our Creator. We have our part to play: "Turn away from your sins and believe the Good News".

Having started his ministry, Jesus goes on to choose the people who are going to help him proclaim the Good News. It is assumed that the people that Jesus called were simple working people. But there is one reason why we should doubt it: all Jewish men at that time had a trade. Jesus was a carpenter, and Peter was a fisherman. But we know that Paul was a highly educated man - a university graduate and a fluent Greek-speaker. And yet he was a tent-maker. While Peter and James and John are stated to be fisherman, we do not know whether Jesus and his disciples were educated men or not. This idea that there were just simple fishermen may have been a picture encouraged by the Church in order to emphasise the miraculous transformation allegedly effected in their abilities by the outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost.

**JESUS CONFRONTS UNCLEANNES. MARK 1:21-45, 2:1-12, 5:1-20, 25-34, 7:24-30**

Jesus says to a leper, "Be clean!" At a stroke, by word and by touch, Jesus declares the invalidity of the taboos which put outcasts beyond the pale of Holiness. But his compassion simultaneously destroys the Jewish explanation of personal catastrophe. A disease like leprosy was regarded as the just curse of God. To say the leper was "clean" would have caused scandal to the orthodox - even to Jesus's closest disciples. Perhaps this is why Mark or his source emphasises Jesus's instruction to meet the requirements of the ritual law. A more radical explanation would be that Jesus's attack on the taboo was beyond even the tolerance of Jesus's Jewish disciples, and



CHRIST CALLS LEVI. HOUBRAKEN



his declaration of cleanliness was turned subsequently into a healing. But there is no evidence for this speculation beyond Mark's text and it is clearly an interpretation not supported by Mark himself.

It is not a man possessed by an unclean spirit who addresses Jesus: it is the spirit itself. The spirit is the first "person" to recognise Jesus' true identity as "God's holy messenger". He is able to do this because he has supernatural knowledge; it takes human beings, and Peter in particular, a good deal longer. He talks of "we" because he recognises that Jesus is launching an attack on all of his own kind. Jesus is depicted as possessing a tremendous supernatural power over the invisible world which (in the understanding of Mark and his contemporaries) controlled the dimension inhabited by human beings.

Jesus' apparent abrogation of the laws of uncleanness presented similar problems of interpretation with respect to other incidents. The emphasis throughout the story of the exorcism of "Mob", the lunatic (5:1-20) is on ritual pollution. The man lives in a cemetery, a place of uncleanness. When the spirits are cast out they go into a herd of pigs - an unclean animal of the kind you would expect to find in Gentile - "unclean" - territory. But the situation is expressed by Mark in terms of spirits. Perhaps the Apostles, less radical than Jesus,

accepted the notion of "uncleanness", but related it to a supernatural war against evil by developing the idea of "spirits of uncleanness". As in the case of the leper, Jesus' original action may have been a comment on the Jewish taboos involving "clean" and "unclean", but Mark's main concern is to show the supernatural power of Jesus against the forces of evil.

The woman with the haemorrhage (5:25-34) almost certainly had a gynaecological condition which rendered her unclean. If this man was holy she should not have been touching him. That is why she was afraid when Jesus realised that he had been touched. Then much to her surprise, no doubt, she found that Jesus was forgiving, and did not seem to share these taboos about ritual cleanliness. The hint of euphemism in "trouble" may not be the only reason why Mark seems to be struggling a little with this story. For instance, how does Jesus know that he has been touched? Mark introduces the idea that Jesus feels the power draining out of him - almost like a battery running down. Likewise, if a woman has some kind of

menstrual problem, how does she know when it stops? Mark says, "She had the feeling inside herself . . ."

A person who was sick in certain ways might have been triply afflicted. First of all they might have had the pain of the illness; secondly the illness might have made them ritually unclean; and thirdly that uncleanness would have been regarded as the curse of God and would have led to them being shunned by those claiming or seeking righteousness. The woman with the bleeding almost certainly had a gynaecological condition which rendered her unclean. She could have kept the condition a secret and just gone about her business, but presumably she was a devout woman who was troubled by the fact that she had been afflicted with this problem. But she could not resist the temptation to touch this holy man in the hope that she might be cured of her condition. She knew she was doing something which, in the eyes of conventional religion, was wrong: when you were unclean it was believed that your ritual uncleanness could be transmitted to others. If this man was holy she should not have been touching him. That is why she was afraid when Jesus realised that he had been touched. Then much to her surprise, no doubt, she found that Jesus was forgiving, and did not seem to share these taboos about ritual cleanliness.

The call of Levi shows the same pattern as the calling of the other disciples: Jesus sees somebody at their trade, and says, "You! Stop what you're doing and come and follow me!" But here there is a significant difference. Levi's trade is the disreputable, almost criminal trade of tax-collecting. Not only were tax-collectors ritually unclean, because they mixed with the hated foreigner, they were "crooks": corruption was built into the Roman system. In countries that have fallen prey to corruption, you have to give a "back-hander" to the official concerned if you want anything done, otherwise he will not do his job. That was how the tax-system worked officially under the Roman authorities. It was assumed that the tax-collector would collect more than was required in tax and keep it. He would extract whatever he thought he could get away with. And the Romans would provide the military force to back up his demands no questions asked, as long as they got their taxes. If you were living in a country where a hated foreigner had invaded and you had some of your own people collaborating with the invader, that would be bad enough; but when those collaborators actually came and started soaking

you for money upon threat of foreign soldiers coming round and assaulting you or throwing you in jail, then you can imagine how people felt about these people. This is certainly the calling of a disciple with a difference. Mark's audience would probably not have reacted with the same degree of horrified consternation as those witnessing the original event: the rift with Judaism was already more-or-less complete and many of his readers would have been Gentiles. Indeed, Jesus's patent breaking of taboo would have been a source of comfort. But there may have been method in Jesus's madness in calling Levi. One of the things that united all Jews beyond the exclusive barriers created by the various factions was the necessity of paying the poll-tax levied specifically on Jews by the Romans in A.D. 6. If you were embarking on a mission to the Chosen People in a racially-mixed cosmopolitan area, who better to choose than someone who knew intimately who it was that continued to claim allegiance to Yahweh despite the real, financial cost? The "children" needed to be contacted first with an invitation to enter the Kingdom before the mission was extended to "house-pets" (see B9.3). Levi may have been a key agent in this mission. Perhaps there is some connection with this possibility and the ancient tradition that Levi was in fact Matthew, and the author of the most "Jewish" of the four Gospels.

By the time Jesus's fame has spread far, and he has a non-Jew going to him and pleading with him to heal her daughter (7:24-30). The woman is from modern Lebanon. It is called Syro-Phoenicia to distinguish it from Libyan Phoenicia, that is Carthage in North Africa. His remark about bread, children and dogs means, "I've come to preach a message to the Jews, the Chosen People of God. They are the children. If I actually help you, I'm giving the food to a dog." Jesus is perhaps not as cruel as he sounds: there were two Greek words for "dog": the one Jesus used - "little dog" (the Greek word is a diminutive) - meant a domesticated dog of the kind that was let in the house, rather than a scavenger. He also qualifies his statement by saying that he must "first" feed the children. But in any case the woman is unperturbed by Jesus's apparent harshness. Jesus is so impressed by her faith that he heals her daughter. That would have been very important to many of Mark's readers, because by the time Mark wrote down his Gospel many non-Jews had become Christians, and they would have taken great comfort in the story. The discussion may have been going on in the Church as to whether non-Jews could actually receive



CHRIST SENDS EVIL SPIRITS INTO SWINE. PINTZ

Communion; because when Jesus established the Eucharist it was a Jewish Passover rite. The story may have been shaped to answer that particular question.

In his dispute about uncleanness with the Pharisees (7:1-23) Jesus quotes loosely from *Isaiah* 29:13. According to the prophets, not all the religious ritual in the world - sacrifices, ritual washing, fasting and penance - can alter the colour of a man's heart in God's sight (see *Isaiah* 58:6-7; *Amos* 5:21-24). The rules and regulations about uncleanness were based on the idea that God is holy, and totally "other". Because He is holy, He might be upset or offended by anything that reminds Him of our bodily functions. Jesus explains that true religion is about attitudes. Many rules and regulations relating to these matters are to be found in the Bible. Some were not in the Bible. The Pharisees who promoted them claimed that they were rules which derived ultimately from Moses and which had been passed on by word of mouth. Jesus appears to reject them completely. To make matters worse, people were using these petty rules to avoid more weighty obligations. One of these is quoted - the rule of "Corban". Religion was being used to avoid what is clearly a moral requirement. The Old Testament Law quite clearly laid down the obligation to honour one's parents (*Exodus* 20:12; 21:17).

#### **MORE MIRACULOUS HEALINGS. MARK 2:1-12, 23-28, 3:1-6, 7:31-37, 8:14-26, 9:14-29**

It is important to understand the basic assumption in the incident of the man lowered through the roof: the sick man is paralysed as a result of God's judgment on his sins. The first thing, therefore, that Jesus says is, "Your sins are forgiven". (It is only to overcome the murmurs of disapproval that Jesus goes on to heal the man. Jesus leaves no doubt as to his divine power!) In the Kingdom proclaimed by Jesus, a person's previous sins are of no account provided a person repents and seeks God's forgiveness. What a person suffers physically is not related to their individual sin. They deserve compassion rather than condemnation. But what for Jesus was primarily a restatement of the significance of individual misfortune becomes, for Mark, a demonstration of Jesus' divine power.

The Pharisees said, "We're an occupied country. Our national and political identity has been completely bulldozed by the Romans. What's left for us? - one thing for sure, and that's the Sacred Law of God. That's what keeps us together as a people." The Herodians said, "We're an occupied country. What have we got left? We've got a king, and we've got a Temple. He may be a puppet king, and the Temple may be a new temple built in a modern (probably Hellenistic style), but we've still got a king and we've still got a Temple." ("Herod's party" is mentioned only in *Mark*. They were either supporters of Herod Antipas, Tetrarch or "ruler" over Galilee, or of his father Herod the Great, who re-built the Temple, or both.) Then a heretic called Jesus turns up from the periphery of the Holy Land, and starts undermining both positions. He heals a man with a withered hand on the Sabbath (3:1-6). At first sight his position seems quite reasonable. He is saying, "Get it into some sort of perspective. If somebody's in desperate need, you break the Law. It's as simple as that. There's no point in blindly following rules and regulations." But in the eyes of the two groups we have mentioned he is attacking the Law, and later on we see him attacking the Temple when he throws the money-changers out. No wonder that the Pharisees and Herod's party, who would normally be at loggerheads, are happy to form some sort of alliance to get rid of this man. In the end we see that they succeed and destroy Jesus on a trumped-up political charge.

Some of the Laws of the Old Testament were quite humane. For instance it was accepted that the poor could walk through a field of wheat and pluck ears by hand. Jesus and his disciples, being vagrants, do just that (2:23). But they are doing it on a Sabbath, and it counts as reaping and winnowing. The Old Testament law specifically forbade ploughing and reaping on the Sabbath (*Exodus* 34:21). Jesus shows that he is not breaking the Law out of ignorance (2:23-28). He gives a very learned response to the criticism of his behaviour: he talks about Abiathar being the High Priest when David and his followers were hungry and went into the Temple and ate the bread that had been set aside for God - the so-called "shew-bread". (For the relevant laws see *Exodus* 25:30; *Leviticus* 24: 5-9). The implication is that Jesus is operating with the authority of the Messiah. Like his predecessor, Jesus is on "active service" - in a war against Satan. (The kind of blow which needs to be struck in the campaign is illustrated by the next incident.)

Jesus gives two reasons for his attitude to the Sabbath. The first is that the Laws of God should not be regarded as burdens, which you blindly accept: He laid them down for the good of His people. The second reason is that he has special authority in this new and extraordinary situation to ignore the Law, if he wishes. That is controversial, to say the least - and some would say blasphemous!

Jesus later exhorts his disciples to beware of the yeast of the Pharisees and of Herod (8:14-21). Because all traces of it had to be removed from the house during the Passover festival, yeast was regarded as ritually unclean. It seems that this saying was prompted by the sight of the bonfires outside "orthodox" households before the festival. Just as yeast expands dough, so the proliferation of rules and regulations by the Pharisees, and the elaborate ritual

law in force at Herod's Temple, are seen as adulterating the purity of the Mosaic code.

If you believe that illness is caused by spirits, a deaf spirit is particularly troublesome because it can not hear you. That is why we have all these tactile goings-on with Jesus spitting and touching a deaf man's tongue and so on (7:31-37). The Greek says, literally, "the bond of his tongue was loosed". It can hear Jesus because he has a mysterious power beyond the scope of ordinary mortals. The story betrays some quite primitive ideas. This is the second time that we have recorded for us the actual Aramaic words. (The previous occasion was the healing of Jairus's daughter.) Clearly, the spectators of Jesus's action are reminded of *Isaiah* 35:5, which prophesies an era of salvation: "The blind will be able to see, and the deaf will hear. The lame will leap and dance, and those who cannot speak will shout for joy. . . . Where jackals used to live, marsh grass and reeds will grow." Perhaps this prophecy also accounts for the "green grass" in the Feeding of the Five Thousand.

In the healing of the blind man of Bethsaida (8:22-26), unless he has written-up events deliberately to give the impression of them being from an eye-witness

Mark seems to be actually relying on somebody who was close to the original occurrences. Somebody who has not had vision before, or not seen for a long time - perhaps since he was a child - would make this sort of "daft" remark. There may



PREACHING FROM A SHIP. FRENCH SCHOOL



nevertheless be a symbolic element: like the later healing of blind Bartimaeus, the miracle occurs just before an incident which unequivocally reveals Jesus as the Messiah. The healing of the blind, like that of the deaf and dumb, is a sign of the era of salvation (*Isaiah* 35:5).

They would have believed at that time that a deaf and dumb spirit was particularly difficult to heal because it could not hear you. In the healing of the epileptic boy (9:14-29) Jesus commands the spirit and it responds because he possesses a huge supernatural power. Jesus is saying that there is no formula for healing this kind of spirit: you have to pray. Jesus comes down from the mountain. He finds that his disciples are in a state of disarray because they simply have not got the faith to perform miracles. Perhaps this is an echo of when Moses went up the mountain, came back, and found that the children of Israel had deserted his God. Jesus reproached the people for their lack of faith in words modeled on *Deuteronomy* 32:5.

#### **VARIOUS TEACHINGS. MARK 2:18-22, 3:22-35**

Jesus and his disciples do not fast (2:18-22). Although the Old Testament prescribed fasting for all Jews only on the annual Day of Atonement (*Leviticus* 16:29), the Pharisees prescribed fasting on Mondays and Thursdays (see *Luke* 18:12). There were also public days which recalled the terrible things that had happened to the people of God in the previous few hundred years. It was believed that these things had come about because Israel had been disobedient to God. By fasting, and thereby showing your sorrow, you were helping Israel to get back on good terms with Him. But Jesus compares himself to the bridegroom coming to the wedding-feast. Wedding imagery is often used by the prophets for the era of salvation: "Like a young man taking a virgin as his bride, He who formed you will marry you. As a groom is delighted with his bride, so your God will delight in you." (*Isaiah* 62:5) See also *Hosea* 2:19; *Ezekiel* 16:8; and *Isaiah* 54:4-5.

"Beelzebub" was the name of an ancient Canaanite deity ("Baal the prince"), probably understood as meaning "lord of the high place" or "lord of the dwelling"; it became the name of the Devil. Jesus' opponents saying, "You're curing all these people, you're casting out all these evil spirits, because you're 'in' with the Devil", and Jesus is rejoinding, "This is ridiculous. If you're

'in' with somebody you don't attack them." The Parable of the strong man's house may have been suggested by the meaning of the name "Beelzebub", but it also resembles an image which appears in *Isaiah*: "The soldier's prisoners will be taken away, and the tyrant's loot will be seized. I will fight against whoever fights you, and I will rescue your children." (*Isaiah* 49:25) Jesus's remark about sinning against the Holy Spirit has drawn a great deal of comment, but he is in fact making a simple point: "What I'm saying is inspired by the Holy Spirit. Anybody who says it's from anywhere else is in fact insulting this same Spirit. How can people be saved if they reject the Holy Spirit?" The Kingdom of God is about seeing the unimportant as valuable. (See 10:13-16.) Jesus, in this comment on his family (3:31-35), is saying that when you join the Kingdom, the family you belong to, the status which is dictated to you, is not important. You are joining a new family, where people do not make these distinctions.

Jesus ministers to the sick while on a lake that flows out as the River Jordan (3:9). Did he invite the rejected to cross into the "Holy Land"?

#### **THE APPOINTMENT AND MISSION OF THE TWELVE. MARK 3:13-19, 31-35, 6:7-13**

The Kingdom of God is about seeing the unimportant as valuable. (See 10:13-16.) Jesus, in a comment on his family (3:31-35), is saying that when you join the Kingdom, the family you belong to, the status which is dictated to you, is not important. You are joining a new family, where people do not make these distinctions. Israel originally had twelve tribes, descended from the twelve sons of Jacob. Are the apostles (3:13-19) Jesus's "spiritual" sons, ordained to create a new "spiritual" Israel?

The apostles are to take out news (6:7-13) – that the Kingdom of God has arrived with Jesus – which is confirmed by two witnesses who have seen his works with their own eyes (*Deuteronomy* 19:15). An "evangelist" is a person who proclaims the Good News. The person who stands on a street corner with a Bible in his hand, preaching to passers-by, is an evangelist. Somebody who knocks on your door and says "You can be saved if you believe this . . ." is an evangelist. The Apostles go out as evangelists. A "missionary" is someone who is sent out by their fellow Christians not only to preach the Gospel but

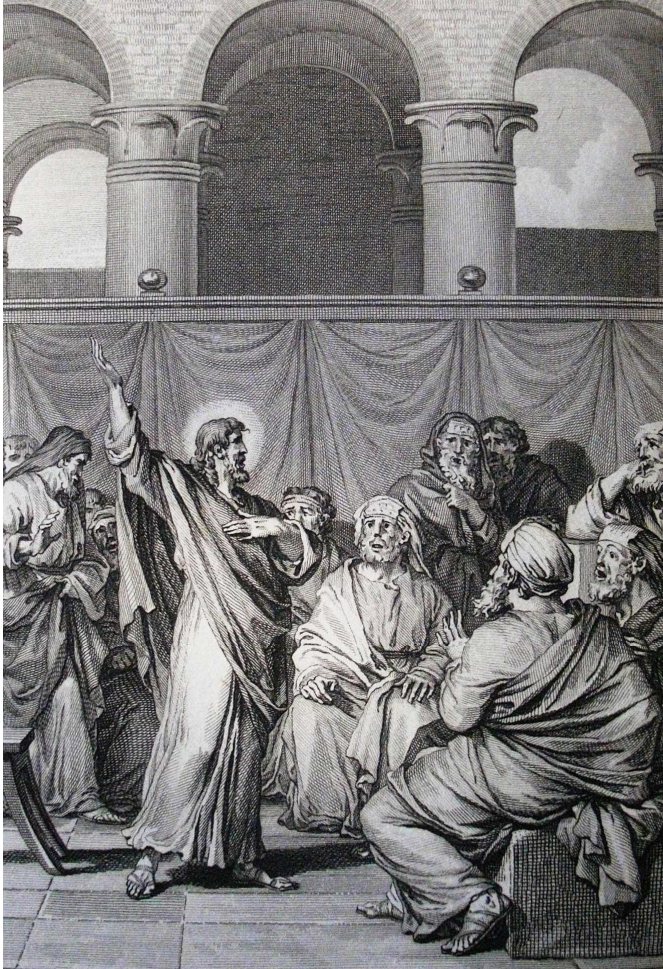
also to minister to people. The term is taken from the Latin word meaning "to send". A "missionary" does good works. Jesus sends the Apostles out as missionaries, because he says to them, "Don't just proclaim the Gospel, but also do good works: drive out demons, heal people." The two go hand in hand. So a modern missionary society of the Church will say to the people it goes to, "We're doing this work because we're Christians." They will not make the benefit conditional upon getting a sympathetic reaction. They will not say, "Look, you've got to be a Christian otherwise we won't give you this injection." That would be a perversion of missionary activity. They are hoping to commend the Christian faith to the people they are helping.

It was the custom for devout Jews who had left Israel and gone into Gentile country, when they came back, to brush off ceremonially the dust and the dirt of the heathen, rather than bring it into the Holy Land. It was part of the idea of ritual cleanliness. Jesus is saying that the Kingdom is not a geographical area: it is about what is in people's hearts, their attitudes. He is giving the custom a spiritual interpretation.

**PARABLES OF THE KINGDOM. MARK 4:1-12, 26-32, 11:12-14, 19-26**

Because the Kingdom is about attitudes, it is very difficult to describe. Jesus uses the device of the parable, which comes from a Greek word meaning "to put side by side", "to compare". In the Old Testament we a similar device: *Ezekiel* 17:2-10 and 2 *Samuel* 12:1-7 serve exactly the same purpose of trying to jolt minds into a deeper understanding of spiritual truths. The parable traditionally known as "The Parable of the Sower" (4:1-12) is about the way people receive the message of the Kingdom of God. Evangelists - that is, people who proclaim the Kingdom - have no control over the way the Good News is received. Jesus refers to *Isaiah* 6:9-11. By reading the original prophecy we can see and understand the point: just as the people of Israel would not believe until they have been overtaken by a catastrophe, so it will take more than the *words* of Jesus to prepare the soil for God's message to His People.

Mark has strung together parables which mention "seed". Having read The Parable of the Different Soils ("The Sower"),



**JESUS DISPUTES WITH THE PHARISEES**  
**FRENCH SCHOOL**

we then have a little parable about the way that the Kingdom of God works. Although it starts off sounding very similar, it has a completely different message. All the exciting, dramatic things in the growth of crops - the germination of the seed, the sprouting - are happening completely out of sight, and there is nothing we can do to make it happen. Jesus is suggesting that the Kingdom is the same. We can spread the message, we can sow the seed, but it is not up to us as to what happens then. We may not necessarily see directly what is happening. If it is true that Mark's audience was a persecuted group of people, for whom things were going very badly, then this parable would have addressed them in a very immediate way. They would have said, "Things may be going badly, but . . . . ."

The "success" of the parable may have led to the generation of another parable which developed this optimistic strain: in the parable of the mustard seed (4:30-32) the Kingdom starts from insignificant beginnings. Jesus' original message about the hiddenness of the Kingdom - hidden in the sense that it no longer coincides with the visible "Kingdom" of Israel - becomes a message about expansion in keeping with the aspirations of the Gentile mission. The parable is actually verified by the history of the Christian Church. An obscure Galilean teacher, with a small group of disciples, has founded the largest religious grouping in the world. But again, think of Mark's audience. Perhaps sometimes they were on the point of despair, but now they hear Jesus prophesying that they were destined to become something great - something which would provide shelter for many people." This parable can be given an allegorical interpretation. An allegory is when all the different parts of the story stand for something else. Not all of Jesus's parables are allegorical: they are usually a quick way of getting a point across. Here, however, the smallest seed can be seen as symbolic of the Gospel, the tree as the Church, and the birds as Christians.

The cursing of the fig tree (11:12-14, 19-26) is an action parable, illustrating God's impending judgment of the holy city. It was almost certainly originally a spoken parable which has become a miracle in transmission. In 11:19-26 Mark gives an alternative meaning to this "new" miracle.

## JESUS COMMANDS THE WAVES. MARK 4:35-41, 6:45-52

This story would bring comfort to a persecuted Church. The disciples' lives are at risk and they are in an impossibly dangerous situation. Yet Jesus shows that you can turn events around quite dramatically, completely "out of the blue". Only God could control the elements: "You rule over the powerful sea; you calm its angry waves." (*Psalms* 89:8) Jesus has the power of God in its fullness.

Why has Mark put this miracle next to parables? Sometimes there is a thin dividing line between the two. It could be argued that Jesus's stilling of the storm is a kind of action parable – in other words, an action which has a deliberate and conscious meaning. There is something that Jesus does later on in the Gospel – the cursing of a fig-tree – which is definitely an action-parable. The feeding of five thousand people is also probably an action-parable. So the distinction between "saying" – telling a story – and "doing" – performing an action – can become blurred.

To calm the terror of the disciples when they saw him walking on the water Jesus came near and spoke words of reassurance. Their significance is to be explained from the Old Testament, and particular *Isaiah* 43. "Courage! . . . Don't be afraid" is God's word to his people in their distress: "Israel, the Lord who created you says, 'Do not be afraid – I will save you. I have called you by name – you are mine. When you pass through the deep waters, I will be with you; your troubles will not overwhelm you.'" (*Isaiah* 43:1) "It is I", literally "I am", may simply be self-identification, but there may just possibly be an echo of the Old Testament form of God's self-revelation (as at the Burning Bush), "I am (He)". Mastery of the sea is a divine attribute, and this incident ranks with the stilling of the storm in showing that the power of God is revealed in Jesus: "Long ago the Lord made a road through the sea, a path through the swirling waters." (*Isaiah* 43:16)

What makes these stories rather strange, however, is that mingled in with the symbolism are details which have the flavour of an eye-witness account – like, for example, "They sat down on the green grass". When Jesus walks on the water it is between three and six o'clock in the morning. The best time for fishing is at dawn.

### **JAIRUS' DAUGHTER. MARK 5:22-24, 35-43**

Mark has dovetail the two stories of Jairus' daughter and the woman with the hæmorrhage to show there is a gap between Jairus coming to him and him actually arriving and finding that the girl had died. No-one would have asked even the greatest of miracle-workers to attend a corpse.

There are lots of interesting details in this story which might have only come from an eye-witness: the name of the girl's father; Jesus's actual words in the Aramaic; the girl's age; Jesus' instruction after the healing. In particular, we are told that Jesus took Peter, James and John with him into the room. (Everybody would have normally avoided the room where the deceased person was laid as an "unclean" zone.) So we can speculate that Mark's Gospel may have been based on an eye-witness report of Peter. Those who favour "natural" explanations of the miracles would find inspiration in the fact that in an eastern climate the whole business of burying the dead was accomplished with the utmost speed (see *Acts* 5:5-10). Perhaps the mourners were mistaken in their hasty belief that the girl had died!

### **THE PEOPLE FED. MARK 6:30-44, 8:1-10**

When the rules of nature are bent in order to heal somebody, we can give our moral support to the intervention. The problem in the feeding of the five thousand (6:30-44) is that Mark presents us with a man who has the power of God interfering with nature for quite trivial reasons - giving five thousand people a snack because he feels sorry for them. Some miracles have a primarily symbolic meaning. Jesus is echoing the major event of the Old Testament: the liberation of His Chosen People, when they crossed the Red Sea, and God fed them with manna in the wilderness (*Exodus* 16:15). It also reminds us of Elisha feeding a hundred men with bread (2 *Kings* 4:42-44). It may also be seen as a fulfillment of the prophecy of the so-called "Messianic Banquet" in *Isaiah* 25:6. The observation, "They were like sheep without a shepherd" is a reference to *Numbers* 27:17, where Moses prays for a leader to succeed him. The people are arranged in groups of a hundred and groups of fifty - probably a reference to when, after leaving Egypt, the Israelites were divided up into tribes. Twelve baskets of scraps are left over. This is undoubtedly



THE TRANSFIGURATION. FRENCH SCHOOL



meant to refer to the twelve tribes of Israel. The Messiah brings bread to feed his people.

At first the feeding of the four thousand (8:1-18) looks like just a repetition of the previous feeding miracle. But the changes in detail are very significant. Why the number of people fed changes from five to four thousand is not clear (unless this represents Mark's estimate of the proportion of Jews to Non-Jews in the Church at that time); but in the statement, "They've been with me for three days and now have nothing to eat", there is almost certainly a reference to the three days that Jesus was in the tomb. The idea seems to be that non-Jews have taken the enormous step of committing themselves to the risen Jesus, the Jewish Messiah, but now they are in a lean time because the Church has begun to be persecuted. There are seven loaves. We know that there were seven major Churches at that time. (They are mentioned in the opening chapters of *Revelation*.) In *The Acts of the Apostles* (6:3) seven men were chosen to look after Gentile interests, so this feeding may be correctly interpreted as a "bridge" between Jew and Gentile. But however we interpret these details, this is clearly a re-run of the Feeding of the Five Thousand for the Gentiles. In the conversation between Jesus and the Syro-Phoenician woman Jesus's ministry was described in terms of feeding: "Can the children have some of the crumbs that fall from the table?" In this miracle feeding has become a kind of symbol for the Good News of the Kingdom; there is almost certainly a reference to the Eucharist.

#### **THE MESSIAH REVEALED. MARK 8:27-38, 9:1-8**

Caesarea Philippi, some 40 kilometres north of Galilee, was named after Caesar and Herod Philip, whose administrative capital it was. Herod Philip was a son of Herod the Great and half-brother of Herod Antipas, Tetrarch of Galilee. ("Tetrarch" was the title of each of the "four rulers" of Herod the Great's empire after it was split by the Romans.) He was Tetrarch of Trachonitis during the period of Christ's ministry in Galilee and for some five or six years after the Crucifixion. Jesus was therefore recognised as the "Messiah" at a major political centre.

This is a great turning-point of the Gospel. Up to this point, Jesus had only been recognised as a very important person by spirits with supernatural knowledge. No human being had

actually said to Jesus, "I know who you are: you're the Messiah." "Messiah" and "Christ" mean the same thing: "the Anointed One". Thereby lies the problem. "Anointed One" is a political title. It is almost as if Peter is saying, "I know who you are: you're the King!" When he responds to Peter notice that Jesus does not himself use the title Messiah; he prefers the title "Son of Man", because it is not political. Indeed, on a similar occasion - when Jesus is put on trial and the Chief Priest says to him, "Are you Messiah?" - Jesus says, "Yes, and you will see *the Son of Man* . . . " He will accept the title, but he does not like using it. In Greek the phrase "The Son of Man" translates very literally the Aramaic "bar nasha", which means simply "man". Jesus frequently applies it to himself in the Gospels. The phrase has a rich and complex history in Jewish literature. In chapter 7 of *Daniel*, four phases of human history are symbolised by four beasts rising from the sea. These are followed by "one like a son of man" (verse 13; "what looked a human being" in the GNB version). The change from bestial to human implies a clear difference in the quality of the successive order of things. The beasts probably represent earthly empires, and the human being the Kingdom of God. It is easy to see how in developments of the imagery of *Daniel* "the son of man" came to be treated as an individual. Thus in *1 Enoch* and *4 Ezra* (outside the accepted books of the Old Testament) the figure appears as a heavenly being who will come to judge the world at the end of time. But the phrase undoubtedly has a completely different aspect as a symbol of humiliation and suffering. It is in evidence in *Daniel*: the beast with great iron teeth eats, crushes and tramples underfoot what remains after its predecessors. Suffering was plainly in evidence when the book was composed. The Son of Man is *waiting* to be glorified. In *Mark* Jesus uses the title "Son of Man" of himself fourteen times. Of these the first two are claims to authority: "the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath" (2:28) and "the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins" (2:10). The remainder are prophetic, used in predictions of his imminent sufferings, and of his future coming in glory. The last use, before the Sanhedrin (14:62), is a clear echo of *Daniel*.

Jesus is evidently thinking that they are going to get the wrong idea and that he had better try and explain to them very quickly that it's part of God's plan that the Messiah should suffer and die. But Peter can not see that: it does not fit in with his notion of the Messiah's role at all. Jesus has to get quite aggressive with him and call him "Satan". Already Jesus has

got a problem with his "image", and explains that, against their expectations, the Son of Man, far from being a triumphant emperor or king, in fact must suffer if God's plan of salvation is to be fulfilled. The conventional Jewish idea of a Messiah, shared by Peter, was based on Old Testament passages like those in *Isaiah* 9 and 11. He was to set up a kingdom on earth, defeat his enemies and bring in a time of peace. Jesus's idea of a Messiah was very different. It was based on the idea of the "The Suffering Servant" in *Isaiah* (50:4 ff.; 52:13-53:12) and the *Psalms* (22; 69; 118. See also *Zechariah* 13:7). Mark takes the opportunity of the first prophecy of death to introduce some teaching about the meaning of suffering: the more you try to protect your own interests the more likely you are to waste our lives; the more sacrifice we make, the more we get close to what life is all about. This is a very hard teaching, and makes Christian discipleship very difficult to accept by anyone not brought up to it - a rather frightening way of life if you take it literally.

It is a sign of the authenticity of the sayings in this gospel when they are recorded even when problematical. Clearly, by the time he wrote his gospel the kingdom had not yet come in power, despite Jesus's promise that it would do so while his original witnesses were still alive. Mark therefore places the saying next to the one clear and unequivocal manifestation of Jesus's power and authority before his death.

three disciples who made up the "inner circle". Peter, James and John are in evidence on two other occasions - at the raising of Jairus's daughter and just before Jesus is arrested in the Garden of Gethsemane. They are a privileged little group who are allowed to see Jesus in his true glory.

The Transfiguration is a very peculiar "event", because here we have all the symbolic trappings normally associated with God Himself given to Jesus. The cloud was the symbol for the presence of God (*Exodus* 40:34; see also 24:16). In the Old Testament account of Moses's ascent of Mount Sinai to obtain the Law, God is represented as emitting a blinding light which is so bright it has to be covered by a cloud, otherwise it would strike the observer dead. Some of that symbolism is here attached to Jesus: he radiates light. As at the Baptism, we witness a voice coming from heaven testifying to God's special favour.



CHRIST INSTITUTES THE EUCHARIST  
FRENCH SCHOOL

How did the disciples know that the two men that Jesus was talking to on the mountain were Moses and Elijah? Did they have labels round their necks with their names on? Both by this time had already been dead for over a thousand years . . . . It could have happened literally, but it has to be treated symbolically too, otherwise it becomes somewhat nonsensical. Moses was the great lawgiver; and Elijah was the greatest of the prophets. The fact is that Moses and Elijah represent the Law and the Prophets. Here we see Jesus chatting with these two great figures, the greatest heroes of the Jewish people, almost as though they are asking him for a few hints on the meaning of life and the will of God. The whole scene is designed to demonstrate that Jesus is an extremely important figure in God's Plan.

Peter is so overawed that he offers to make three shelters. He seems to think that such important people should have booths or tabernacles to sit in - rather like one would place a holy image in its own little shrine. Peter shows a natural human desire to "capture the moment". Mark has himself painted a word-picture which is an icon of Jesus the Messiah, inviting use as a focus for worship and devotional meditation.

Peter has recognised Jesus as the Messiah. Now Jesus demonstrates in no uncertain terms who he really is to the

#### **QUESTION ABOUT ELIJAH. MARK 9:9-13**

Jewish folklore included the notion that before the Messiah appeared Elijah would come again. It reminds us of the British legend that King Arthur will re-appear at a time of national crisis. Jesus says after the decisive revelation of his power at the Transfiguration that Elijah *has* come, and that it was John the Baptist. The Jews expected the return of the prophet to prepare for the coming of God or of the Messiah (*Malachi* 4:5f). Just as "Elijah" - that is, John the Baptist - had suffered, so the Son of Man would suffer.

The way in which John meets his death provides a contrast between the corrupt and worldly court of Herod, with its disregard for life and the ascendancy of pride and lust, and the values which Jesus says he must exemplify in his own ministry. From now on the suffering servant tries to spell out to his disciples the cost of following him.

## TRUE GLORY. MARK 10:35-45

Jesus makes a prediction here of the martyrdom of James and John. We know that James was beheaded, because it says so in the *Acts of the Apostles* 12:2. We do not know what happened to John. The idea of the cup of suffering (*Isaiah* 51:17-22, *Psalms* 75:8; see also *Revelation* 14:10) was associated with bearing retribution. Jesus himself refers to his cup of suffering when he is in the Garden of Gethsemane (14:36). He undoubtedly saw his own vocation as giving his life in place of the many as prophesied: "The Lord says, 'It was my will that he should suffer; his death was a sacrifice to bring forgiveness . . . My devoted servant, with whom I am pleased, will bear the punishment of many and for his sake I will forgive them.'" (*Isaiah* 53:10-11) The baptism of suffering (*Isaiah* 43:2, *Psalms* 42:7, 69:1-3; see also *Luke* 12:50) derives from the image of being immersed in calamity. Baptism also came to be associated with suffering when martyrs died in the Roman arenas. If they were killed before baptism, it was believed that their own blood baptised them. Mark has Jesus address himself to the situation of the early Church.

Jesus's disciples, still interpreting his Kingdom in a political way, are beginning to haggle. They are jostling for the important positions because they think Jesus is now marching on Jerusalem and going to set up his Empire. So Jesus takes a child (9:33-37) . . . A sentimental attitude to children in general is a modern phenomenon. In the past they were regarded as a liability until signs of adult sense were seen. In the meantime you got as much work out of them as possible in menial and boring jobs. (In Aramaic the word "talya" means both "servant" and "child".) This is still the case in many Third World countries: child labour is still prevalent. Jesus is taking a child as an example of somebody who is totally unimportant in society, and saying, "You've got to receive the kingdom like a child. You must not be interested in power or status in a worldly sense."

Children were, in the eyes of society at that time, totally unimportant in their own right as individuals. Jesus is saying that the Kingdom of God is about caring for the unimportant, noticing those people whom society does not hold in a very high regard. Many people think that Jesus is focusing on the innocence of children as the quality required to gain entry to the Kingdom, but it is in fact a relatively modern idea that

children are "innocent". Jesus in fact is homing-in on the social status of children at that time (10:13-16).

In fact, far from being sentimental about family ties, Jesus says that such considerations are secondary in the Kingdom (10:28-31). Here mother, father, brothers, sisters are lumped together with houses and fields. The family was seen as a sign of wealth. If you had a lot of relatives you were "well off" because you had, simultaneously, lots of business contacts, lots of supporters in hard times, and lots of people to borrow money off. A family was seen not so much as a cosy little huddle where everybody loves each other, but more in terms of an economic unit which offered protection to its members - along with agricultural land. Jesus says, "Leave all that behind and your rewards will be beyond your wildest dreams. . . . But you'll also get persecutions."

Jesus goes even further: a rich man is advised to sell his goods and give the proceeds to the poor (10:17-25). To understand this story it must be appreciated that in the conventional wisdom of the time riches were regarded as a reward given by God. People who were rich were so because they had been

**ENTRY TO THE KINGDOM. MARK 9:33-37, 10:13-25, 28-31, 12:28-34**

righteous, and were in God's favour. The rich young man says that he has kept the Law, and he assumes that his wealth is a reward. But he still feels there is something lacking. He uses the phrase "eternal life". He may mean, "I've got everything that I could possibly have but I'm still going to die"; "eternal life" could mean "life after death". Or it could be that he feels he is lacking a certain *quality* of life which has nothing to do with the fleeting moments of material happiness. In his advice, Jesus turns the conventional wisdom completely upside-down and the disciples were perplexed at what Jesus said because he was turning everything on its head. But Jesus went further: he actually said that wealth was an *obstacle* to obtaining eternal life. "The Eye of the Needle" probably refers to a narrow gate in the walls of Jerusalem. Imagine a camel being taken into the city through this gate. If it is very heavily laden, the only way you can get the animal through is to take the burden off its back, send it on, and then re-load it on the other side. Jesus is saying that if you want to enter the Kingdom of God your



JESUS' DISCIPLES SLEEP. HOUBRAKEN



riches will obstruct you. The more possessions you have, the more your priorities are dominated by looking after them.

Later in Jerusalem a lawyer's question about which are the greatest commandments (12:28-34), is based on the fact that in the Old Testament laws there are 248 "do"s and 365 "don't"s. The answer combines *Deuteronomy* 6:4-5 (the *Shema* - Hebrew for "Hear" - which Jews recited daily) with *Leviticus* 19:18. This insight into the spiritual and moral nature of true religion is already found in the Old Testament (*I Samuel* 15:22; *Hosea* 6:6). The requirements of the Kingdom are spelled out in the Scriptures for all who have eyes to see.

### **INTO JERUSALEM. MARK 10:46-52, 11:1-11, 15-18, 12:41-44**

A blind man on the road to Jerusalem hails Jesus as "Son of David" is a messianic title. (For the messianic prophecies see *Isaiah* 11:15; *Jeremiah* 23:5-6; *Ezekiel* 34:23-24; see also *Mark* 12:35.) The blind beggar here is hailing Jesus as "Messiah". As Jesus approaches the Holy City, there is a great deal of messianic expectation. This would have built up to an almost hysterical climax at the time of the national festival of the Passover.

Some of the people may have seen the colt which Jesus sends his disciples to find as a pointer to a prophecy of Zechariah. Matthew the Evangelist, who is keen on presenting Jesus as the fulfillment of the messianic prophecies, says in his Gospel: "This happened in order to make what the prophet had said come true", and then he quotes *Zechariah* 9:9: "'Tell the city of Zion, Look your king is coming to you! He is humble and rides on a donkey and on a colt, the foal of a donkey.'" (*Matthew* 21:5). Jesus sends the disciples to find an animal, and it is there waiting for them. In other words, according to Mark it is all part of God's pre-ordained plan that Jesus should ride into Jerusalem as the Messiah. There might have been people who said, "It was Jesus's own fault that he came to a sad end. He brought everything on himself. If he hadn't provoked the authorities by riding triumphantly into Jerusalem, and then going in and turning over the money-changers' tables in the Temple, he wouldn't have been executed. It was a stupid thing to do if he wasn't claiming to be the Messiah." So to counteract this argument Mark would say, "God planned it that way - God wanted him to do that. The colt was there. It was tied up for him. It was waiting."

Since Solomon's Temple had been destroyed by the Babylonians in 586 B.C., no real attempt had been made to replace it. The "new" Temple had been begun by Herod the Great in 20 B.C. and, according to John's Gospel (2:20), had taken forty-six years to build. In Herod's building the actual sanctuary stood on raised ground surrounded by a large precinct. If you were a non-Jew, you would come up against a barrier with a sign: "Let no foreigner cross this barrier except on penalty of death." If you passed the point, you risked your life and would probably cause a riot. In order to make an offering, or buy a sacrifice, pilgrims had to use Tyrian shekels.

These were coins which did not have the Emperor's head depicted on them, because it was believed coins which did transgressed the second Commandment: "You shall not make for yourself a graven image." In any case, because the Emperor was believed by many to be a god, he himself was an idol. You therefore had to change your money, and the people who changed it for you were taking a commission, profiting out of simple pilgrims. Likewise, you could buy the prescribed sacrifices at the Temple to save you carrying it all the way from home, but again, they were probably being sold at inflated prices, and the priests were getting a "rake-off". It is this corruption that Jesus is reacting against as he drives out the money-changers (11:15-18). Using Jeremiah's phrase (*Jeremiah* 7:11) when he had made his protest at Solomon's Temple six hundred years earlier, Jesus said they were turning the Temple into a "hideout for thieves". And not only that: all the trading was going on in the Gentile section, implying that that area was not very important as far as worship was concerned. Jesus objected to this division, and quoted *Isaiah* 56:7: "My Temple will be called a house of prayer for the people of *all* nations", that is, not just for Jews. Nevertheless, everyone would have been aware that the cleansing of the Temple was an act of the Messiah (*Malachi* 3:1-3; *Zechariah* 14:21).

In the Temple was a huge offertory-chest with a large trumpet-shaped tube on top down which people loved to clatter their coins. Sometimes rich men would even hire a trumpeter to call attention to their giving. Indicating a poor widow throwing in a small coin, Jesus is saying that religious practice is not all about showing off piety, because God knows what you are really like. Even if you are only able to make a very small act of charity, God knows what you are doing.

**DISPUTES WITH THE ESTABLISHMENT. MARK 10:2-12,  
11:27-33, 12:13-27, 12:35-37**

The religious leaders – the "big shots" in Jerusalem – behave like politicians. A frequent criticism of the Church in the past is that its leaders often have not been men of principle: they have been worldly-wise compromisers, more interested in power than principle. The Jewish establishment would not criticise John the Baptist. Like all good politicians they did not want to align themselves against someone who was popular. So they were afraid to criticise him or say he was a fake. But Jesus said, "If you were willing to go along with John, why aren't you willing to go along with me?" Of course the point is that they are moral cowards. They are not interested in principle at all: they are interested in preserving their own power and going whichever way the wind is blowing.

The Pharisees test Jesus' loyalty to the Emperor by raising the question of taxes. They may have been referring to a particular tax levied from A.D. 6 - a poll tax on every Jew. His opponents try to "soften up" Jesus, saying, "You're a man who doesn't care about people's status. Give it to us straight, Jesus . . . ." – but it was a trick, because if he said, "*Don't* pay your taxes", that is rebellion against Rome; and if he said, "*Do* pay your taxes", he was collaborating with the occupier. Imperial Rome's main interest was in revenue from its territories. Jesus extricates himself intelligently. The coin bore the Emperor's head on one side and an image of the goddess of Peace on the other, with an inscription which read (in translation): "Tiberius Caesar Augustus, son of the divine Augustus, Chief Priest." Note that Jesus *sent for* a coin - possession of money bearing the Emperor's head was illegal in the Temple precincts. Jesus then uses it as a visual aid and symbol: "This has got the Emperor's picture on it: give to the Emperor what belongs to the Emperor"; in other words, "I'm not concerned about these material things. I'm not here to talk about money."

The common teaching of the scribes was that the Messiah was to be an earthly descendant of David (2 *Samuel* 7:12-16; see also *John* 7:41-42). This saying of Jesus about the ancestry of the Messiah raises the somewhat disturbing question, "Was Jesus of Nazareth not a descendant of David?" The fact that Jesus



CHRIST APPREHENDED IN THE GARDEN. GOLTZIUS

discusses "the Messiah" in the third person is also rather disconcerting to orthodox Christians. But probably Jesus is trying to point beyond the issue of the earthly ancestry of the Messiah, and to encourage people to focus rather on the *nature* of the Messiah. It is possible that Jesus was trying to promote the concept of the Son of Man rather than an earthly monarch. It is surprising that such a "difficult" saying has survived, and it testifies to the authenticity of Mark's record of the sayings of Jesus.

The Sadducees ran the Temple. They were wealthy, upper class Jews who had a stake in all the business that went on round it, and they were very conservative. They believed that if you were favoured by God, having done what was right in His eyes, then God would bless you with wealth and power and privilege. It was of course in their interests to believe that, because *they* were wealthy, *they* were powerful, and *they* were privileged. They wanted to hang on to all of that. The Sadducees ask Jesus a made-up, "clever" question with a view to puzzling and "throwing" him. It is comparable to asking what happens at the resurrection to a man who has been eaten by cannibals. But Jesus needs also to tread carefully because the example is based on Scripture: *Deuteronomy* 25:5-10 (see also *Genesis* 38:8). His reply implies that in heaven we will be different: we will be able to love everybody else equally without any problems, because we will not be weighed down by sin and selfishness. We will be like angels. But Jesus also confounds them on their own terms. The Sadducees only accepted the "Torah" or "Books of Moses" as perfectly authoritative, and assumed that in them there was no evidence for a doctrine of resurrection. Jesus obligingly quotes a proof-text from *Exodus* 3:6.

Followers of Rabbi Hillel, a leader of one Pharisaic school, said that divorce could occur for very trivial reasons, like burning the bread. On the other hand, the school of Rabbi Shammai maintained that divorce should be allowed only for adultery and indecency. But whatever one's stance, at the time Jesus was saying this divorce was relatively very easy - for men. (Although Roman Law allowed a woman to divorce her husband, Jewish Law did not.) If a man got tired of his wife, all he had to do was give her a note proving that she had been divorced. You did not have to come up with any reason to justify your action (see *Deuteronomy* 24:1). Clearly, that did

little for the status of women, and was very unfair. Jesus appeals beyond the Mosaic Law to *Genesis*: he goes back to how he thinks God designed relationships between men and women and what marriage is all about, and because of that, if a man keeps divorcing his wife and taking another, then in fact he is committing adultery. He is primarily criticising a very lax approach to divorce. It possible for a couple to make vows before God and say they are actually going to stay together for life, and then change *mutually* their minds? Roman Catholics take a very hard line on this, but as is frequently the case, their Church is promoting an ideal of perfection. You may obtain an annulment if you can prove that the marriage never took place in the first place, as, for instance, in the case of a couple who never "consummated" their marriage by having sexual relations, or, as in the case of a couple being related.

#### **PREDICTIONS AND WARNINGS. MARK 13:1-37**

In chapter 13 Jesus predicts at length terrible disasters. The "abomination of desolation" (v.14) - a quotation from *Daniel* 9:27, 11:31 and 12:11 - had been predicted in the Old Testament. This prophecy was regarded as fulfilled in the desecration of the Temple by Antiochus of Syria in 168 B.C.; the phrase is applied to this event in *1 Maccabees* 1:54. Now a further fulfillment is prophesied: the destruction of City and Temple in A.D. 70. But Jesus is also predicting the coming of the Son of Man and the end of the world in the traditional language of prophecy (*Isaiah* 13:10; 34:4). Jerusalem - with the Temple - was the centre of the Jewish faith, and it was believed that God had a special presence there. When the Romans destroyed Jerusalem and flattened the Temple to the ground, for the Jews and the earliest Christians this was an absolutely catastrophic event, and must have signaled for them the beginning of the end.

A closer look reveals three different kinds of material: (a) some probably generated by the Church in response to the current persecutions; (b) some in the style of apocalyptic literature; and (c) two authentic parables (the fig-tree and the steward) and a saying which has been placed here by association ("Heaven and earth will pass away . . . "). The destruction of Jerusalem, the end of the world, the hard time that Christians were having - all three are connected in the mind of Mark and therefore in the Jesus represented by Mark; and it is a suitable introduction to that part of the Gospel which deals with the disaster which

is about to strike Jesus and his disciples. It is from this point on that the net starts to close on Jesus and his fate becomes sealed.

#### **PRESAGES OF DEATH. MARK 12:1-12, 14:3-9**

The parable of the vineyard (12:1-12) is one of the two parables - the Parable of the Soils is the other one - which is definitely an allegory. An "allegory" is a story in which each element has a different meaning. The vineyard represents Israel, the tenants represent the leaders of the Jews, the different slaves sent to bring them to order represent the prophets, and the owner of the vineyard is God, who sends his Son, the Messiah, Jesus. Clearly, the parable is a not-very-cryptic criticism of the way the leaders of the Jews were running the religious set-up at the time. The heavily allegorical interpretation of the "Parable of the Soils" found in *Mark* makes that explanation suspect; this parable is equally so because of its form. It appears to be based on the story of the vineyard in *Isaiah* 5:1-7 and concludes with a quotation from *Psalms* 118:22-23.

Expensive perfume is usually bought in a very fancy bottle with some very elaborate packaging. We are paying probably as much for this as we do for the contents. The ancients would hand-carve a piece of alabaster into a jar with a narrow neck, and in it they would put a perfumed oil. It had to be shaken for it to pass through this narrow neck, and a small amount of the precious substance would come out. The woman in this (14:3-9) story takes one of these jars, which would cost a great deal in itself because a craftsman had to carve it, and she just breaks the top off and empties the whole lot over Jesus. The ancients did not have cosmetics, or medicines, or soaps, or detergents, but oil was put to various uses. You could mix olive oil with rare substances to make a thick highly-scented unguent which you might use in various ways. For instance, you might oil on your hair and comb out all the parasites. (Insects tend to prefer "clean" hair.) Because only rich people were able to buy and use it, this oil became a sign of wealth and status. By extension, it became a mark of royalty. To this very day we still anoint our sovereign at the coronation: "The Queen . . . was left standing in a plain white garment of the severest simplicity; . . . the Archbishop came down towards her from the altar, attended by the Dean bearing the ampulla, in the form of an eagle silvergilt, and the spoon of anointing . . . The Dean poured oil from the eagle's beak into the spoon. The





PETER DENIES CHRIST. HOUBRAKEN



Archbishop dipped his thumb in the oil and, speaking the words of consecration aloud so that all might hear, solemnly raised the queen to her solemn and mysterious dignity by anointing her upon the hands, upon the breast, and upon the head . . . Thus Elizabeth II became a queen in the sight of God. The time for humility and simplicity was over. The Lord's anointed was entitled to handle the emblems and wear the vestments that belong to that august dignity." (A.V. Cookman in *The Times* 3 June 1953)

There was another use for oil. In hot climates, when a person dies, their body decomposes very quickly. If you were putting the deceased in an expensive cave tomb there might be visits and various rites and ceremonies, so to disguise the decomposition you would cover the body with oil and wrap it up in bandages – rather like the process of mummification, although the Jews did not go as far as the Egyptians. Jesus is on his way to a triumphal entry into Jerusalem (Bethany was a small village about two-and-a-half kilometres from Jerusalem, beyond the Mount of Olives). In her own consciousness, the woman is anointing him as Messiah. But Jesus gives it a further interpretation: he says, "She doesn't realise it, but in fact she's preparing my body for death. It's a symbolic act." So the two uses of the oil – as an expensive cosmetic for important people like royalty, and as an embalming liquid for dead bodies – are used by Jesus to explain neatly that as the King, he must die. It is a point he has been trying to get across to his disciples since they recognised him as the Messiah.

This passage is often used as a justification for expenditure on things like buildings and stained glass and so on which, though extravagances, are a way of honouring God. This is because Jesus quotes *Deuteronomy* 15:11, "There poor are always there if you really want to help them." People often want to articulate their faith by building elaborate churches. (See the quotation at the end of this section.)

#### **THE LAST SUPPER. MARK 14:10-31**

All sorts of speculation has taken place about Judas and his motives in betraying Jesus (14:10-11). It may be that he was acting in good faith as Jesus's emissary, and it was only subsequently that opprobrium was attached to him by Peter and his circle.

Just as the ass is there waiting for the entry into the city, so everything is ready waiting for Jesus' Last Supper with his disciples (14:12-25). Mark wants to make the point that Jesus's suffering was not something rather unfortunate that just happened. God planned it for a purpose. Jesus adapted the symbolism of the Passover. When he said, "This is my body", he re-called the slaughter of the Passover lamb, which made it possible for the Israelites to be spared when the destroying angel attacked Egypt at the Exodus. Jesus is comparing himself to this lamb. "Covenant" means "agreement". The original agreement was sealed by the blood of the sacrifice which had to be put on the door-post. Jesus' death became the Christian equivalent: he had to die so that his people could be liberated from the clutches of the Devil and enter into the Kingdom of God. The Eucharist is, in fact, the Christian Passover.

In response to Peter's promise of enduring faithfulness (14:26-31) Jesus quotes from *Zechariah* 13:7. Even his abandonment by his friends is according to God's plan. The fulfillment of Jesus' prediction concerning Peter can be read in 14:66-72.

#### **GETHSEMANE. MARK 14:32-42**

Jesus, like any normal human being, is overcome with fear and anxiety in the Garden of Gethsemane (14:32-42), because he knows what is going to happen to him. Nevertheless, as "the Son of Man", he accepts that his suffering is a necessary part of God's plan.

Once again we have Peter, James and John in a privileged group. They were there at the Raising of Jairus's Daughter and the Transfiguration, and they are here now in the Garden of Gethsemane. But the account does raise problems: if Jesus was entirely alone, in a very intimate encounter between himself and God, and the disciples were drowsy or asleep, how did anybody know what took place? As in the case of the Transfiguration, the dividing line between historical event and symbolic tableau is blurred. And once again (as in the case of "I tell you, there are some here who will not die until they have seen the Kingdom of God come with power") authentic sayings delivered possibly at another time and another context may have been incorporated into the incident: "Keep watch, and pray that you will not fall into temptation" (a theme taken up in further teaching recorded in *Matthew*) and "The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak."

## THE TRIALS. MARK 14:32-42, 15:1-20

Jesus's alleged words about erecting a new Temple (14:32-42) could have been heard as a claim to Messiahship (2 *Samuel* 7:13; *Zechariah* 6:12). Jesus expresses his claim in words based on *Psalms* 110:1 and *Daniel* 7:13. The title "Son of Man" implied possession of the total power of God; it was tantamount to blasphemy. The penalty for blasphemy was stoning (*Leviticus* 24:16). (In the *Acts of the Apostles* it is recorded that Stephen was stoned for the same crime.) The Jews could not carry this penalty out because the Romans reserved the death penalty for their own use. The Sanhedrin, therefore, had a problem: they could agree on a charge against Jesus, but they could not carry out the sentence. So they had to get him before the Roman authorities and pin something else on him there - something the Romans would be interested in. Meanwhile they started to mock him. If Jesus was a great prophet, then he would have supernatural knowledge. Therefore, when he was blindfolded, and they started to rain blows on him, he would be able to guess who was hitting him. This was meant to be a cruel joke at his expense.

The Sanhedrin try to pin a *political* charge on Jesus of the kind which the authorities would be interested in. The Romans were not concerned about the internal religious disputes of the Jews. But Pilate was not convinced that he was a political activist. Nevertheless, he had Jesus flogged. Normally, the victim would not have survived. In that way Pilate would have had it both ways because the nuisance could have been removed without the need to justify a formal death penalty. Unfortunately - from Pilate's point of view - Jesus survived the flogging, and so he had Jesus crucified to keep the crowds happy. The Passover celebrated Israel's liberation from a former oppressor. There would have been a lot of unrest. Pilate was trying to calm the situation down and keep everybody in a good mood. What better way to do this than to have a public execution, which everybody enjoyed, and to show how sensitive the regime was to Jewish opinion? Having mocked Jesus as a prophet after the religious charge, they then mocked Jesus as a king after the political charge. And then they took him off to be crucified. The detail of the Passion narrative corresponds closely to the Old Testament descriptions of the Suffering Servant and the righteous sufferer: *Isaiah* 50:6; 53:3,5; *Psalms* 22:7-8,18; 69:21; 109:25; *Lamentations* 2:15).



JESUS SCOURGED. MARILLIER

### **THE CRUCIFIXION. MARK 15:22-37, 15:42-47**

Executions were very squalid affairs. The crosses would have been set up by the town rubbish dump and normally the bodies would have been left to rot on their makeshift gibbets.

Mark records Jesus's words from the cross (15:22-37). Some people say, "What a holy man! Even to the very last he was quoting from the Scriptures, because this is in fact the first line of *Psalms* 22". Others say, "Jesus, being human, felt totally abandoned by God." But however we interpret them, we have preserved a very cruel joke by the bystanders: "He's calling on Elijah!" (who was supposed to appear before the Messiah came.) They say this because Jesus's words, "Eloi, Eloi," sound like "Elijah, Elijah". The whole story of Jesus's Passion hangs together. The orderliness of the account emphasises a theological point: these events had been planned by God as the culmination of the mission of "The Suffering Servant".

### **THE BURIAL. MARK 15:42-47**

The friends of Jesus would have been anxious to get the whole affair over with by the time the Passover started that evening (15:42-47). Jewish (and Christian) festivals begin at dusk on the previous day and carry on to dusk on the following day, so the solemn Passover Sabbath began on the Friday evening. Jesus was crucified at nine o'clock in the morning. So, if he died at three o'clock in the afternoon there would have been very little time to get the body down. The authorities would have co-operated because of Jewish sensibilities: the Holy City should not be contaminated by a ritually unclean blasphemer's decomposing body. There was just enough time to place his body in the tomb before the Sabbath began; washing and anointing the body would have to wait until first light on the Sunday morning . . .

### **THE EMPTY TOMB. MARK 16:1-8**

Until this point we have the story of a man who said a lot of wonderful things, did a lot of wonderful things, obviously had tremendous power, and because he was so righteous came to grief – as is often the case with people who hold out on matters of principle. The actual story of Jesus's last day or two runs as a continuous story. But then, after Jesus's death, we do not have a continuous story. Indeed, all of the Resurrection-stories in the

Synoptic Gospels are something of a disappointment after the long detailed narrative of Jesus's death. In fact there were stories in circulation that we know were never actually told, and we will never know what happened in detail. Paul mentions that Jesus appeared to five hundred people at once. We do not have the story. He also mentions that Jesus appeared to James. We do not have the full story of this occurrence either.

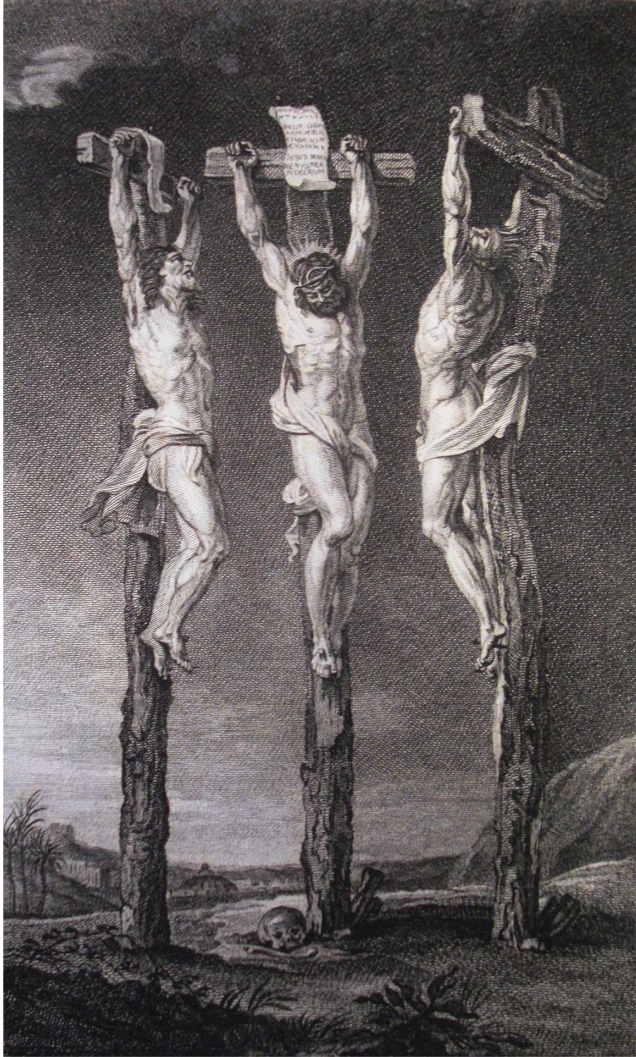
Mark's Gospel does not have any "Resurrection stories" as such. All we get is the empty tomb (16:1-8). Jesus does not appear at all. It looks as though the Gospel ended there, and then after a while lots of other stories were collected together in Matthew, Luke and John, and somebody tacked summaries onto the end of Mark - but this is all very strange and all very unsatisfactory, especially since so much hinges on the belief that Jesus rose from the dead. Perhaps this is because it was such a peculiar occurrence. People were not expecting it. They were not consciously trying to remember every single detail, and when they were asked to say what happened they could only come up with rather scrappy little anecdotes. This is rather like if you were walking down the road, and you saw an old friend whom you knew to be dead. If somebody said to you afterwards, "What happened?" you would be a little bit confused in your account. If you had been sitting in a house all night waiting for a ghost to appear and it actually appeared it would be a different matter. But in an emotionally-charged atmosphere, where does reality end, and fantasy begin? Another possible explanation for the skimpiness of the material on the Resurrection is that for Mark and his generation the most important event was not the Resurrection but the imminent Second Coming ("Parousia"); but when people began to die before the End had come the Resurrection developed an extra importance as the fulfillment of the promise to those who had already died, rather than just as the vindication of the righteousness of Jesus in the eyes of God.

## POSTSCRIPT

In the synoptic gospels the afflicted are often “unclean”, and are pronounced “clean” by a saviour. The thaumaturgic word of Jesus of Nazareth, who is recognised as “the Holy One of God” by the demons of uncleanness, is an extension of John the Baptist’s ministry of ritual washing in the Jordan. In the original Jewish context, the pre-occupation of both John and Jesus was undoubtedly the enabling of “unclean” Jews to gain access to the Temple in Jerusalem. In the apostolic interpretation, which sought to universalise this ministry, the emphasis became the removal of a taint which had afflicted all humankind with a sickness unto death. Paul of Tarsus declared, “As in Adam all die, in Christ shall all be made alive.” The progenitor of the human race had been poisoned by the ultimate non-*kosher* food – the fruit of Eden’s forbidden tree. The Petrine Christ, however, drinks the draught of death in Gethsemane and is hoisted up on the cross like Moses’ brazen serpent which neutralised the venom which was killing the Hebrews in the wilderness. (John’s Gospel makes the comparison explicit.) Miraculously, the Messiah of the Christian Gospels is restored – after the ritual pollution of his death “outside the camp” – to a hale humanity manifest in a resurrected body. And by faith anyone can opt into this detoxified and immortalised humanity by baptismal cleansing, freshly interpreted as participation in Jesus’s death. By gazing and keeping the eyes of faith focussed on the cross, and by eating and drinking the miraculous antidote of the flesh and blood of Christ (a salve made explicit by the Christ of John the Evangelist) we become immune to the ills visited upon us by the primeval taboo – in token of which we flout the Noahide covenant forbidding the taking of blood and are permitted to transgress the most fundamental dietary prohibition known to man: the eating of human flesh. So it was that medieval Christendom became cannibalistic.

But this entire theological superstructure is built on a misinterpretation of *Genesis* and the laws in the *Torah* relating to purity. What in truth brought death to our first parents was the termination of access to the Tree of Life – and not some kind of poisoning.

There is no reason to believe that the Tree of Life was not included among all the trees (apart from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil) the fruit of which they could eat



JESUS CRUCIFIED. AFTER RUBENS



prior to their disobedience. In the event, their transgression resulted in exclusion from the Garden of Eden, and in due course of time they died. They also lost their terms of familiarity with God. And shame entered the world. Jehovah showed them how to cover their newly-perceived nakedness with the skins of beasts, thereby instituting animal sacrifice. And the ultimate solution, eventually established at Horeb and Sinai, was to create a sacred enclave (according to a divinely-revealed pattern) in the midst of a separated and holy people – at first the temporary structure of the tabernacle in the wilderness, and later the Temple in Jerusalem. Here the source and fount of all holiness could visit His people whose sins were covered by the sacrifice of their most precious asset: livestock without blemish, imbued with the mystery of a life which, in the blood, was poured out as an offering to God.

In the later absence of a Temple and the means to effect animal sacrifice, whether by political annihilation or diaspora, the solution became increasingly the maintenance of a purified people by reverent adherence to the *mitzvot* and to sacred times and seasons. In the weekly Sabbath and the annual festivals the community created by adherence to the sacred ordinances could become the dwelling-place of the *shekhinah*. Salvation came about by keeping the Law, and not by some mystical participation in the death and resurrection of a demigod.

Christianity is in fact the natural out-growth of a mind-set in which ritual impurity, at least at the time the Gospels were written, was interpreted as a demonic possession which could only be remedied by the intervention of a super-human God-Man. So much for The Unfortunates. As for the rest of the human race, its sinfulness was the result of a kind of poisoning brought on by the ingestion of the supreme non-*kosher* food item: the fruit of the Forbidden Tree. For the apostolic Church, the proffered solution for humankind-in-general is immersion in a purifying *mikveh* newly-interpreted as the tomb of Jesus – a tomb no longer (as in the Law) a place of profound uncleanness, infected by a corpse, but now the womb of a New Adam incorporated into the risen body of a miraculously-conceived Saviour and a community which, as the redeemed Church, is by faith the Body of Christ.

In this scheme of things, the original significance of “baptism” – or “immersion” – for the Jews is lost. For John the Baptist,

that meaning was as a ritual washing from creaturely impurity and a re-birth into the full identity of one of God's holy people, set apart to His glory. Such an one, so cleansed, could enter the presence of God at the times and seasons appointed by Him, in the hope of the immortality lost with Eden at a date and in a manner within the secret counsels of the Holy One.

In Christian theology, Jesus of Nazareth mingles within his person the "evil" of Adamic human nature with the absolute goodness of the only-begotten Son of God. Those who are mystically "in Christ" (to use the terminology of Paul of Tarsus) drink blood – blood made *kosher* by the divine life of the God-Man whose command overcomes all taboos. The solution to the human predicament is a kind of magic seen in terms of exorcism or antidote. Baptism into Jesus's death is the ultimate cure-all. Unfortunately, the symbolism doesn't fit. Although the apostle and evangelist John makes great play of the water and the blood at Jesus's crucifixion, the Saviour's death was not primarily a death by drowning, nor were sacrifices in the Temple killed by water. The Hebrews were not drowned or even immersed in the Sea of Reeds, but walked through the parted waves as on dry land. And Noah's Flood offers no precise analogy at all, since the wicked who were drowned did not come up again out of the waters. The nearest biblical parallel to a watery death and subsequent resurrection is Jonah's transit through the belly of the whale. It is, indeed, a comparison put in Jesus's own mouth as "the sign of Jonah". It is only an exact parallel, however, if Jesus is seen as swallowed by Death without dying in its truest sense as oblivion – as in medieval Christendom's image of Christ's "Harrowing of Hell" while in the tomb. Tellingly, the medieval Church abandoned baptism by total immersion, with its obscure symbolism of ritual death, and instead took to sprinkling infants – a rite which in the popular imagination took on the character of an exorcism.

A case can be made for the meaningful death of Jesus. John the Evangelist and John of Patmos both identify him with the Passover lamb (*John* 1:29, 19:36; *Revelations* 5:6, 9). Since that lamb was slain in place of the first-born of Israel, Jesus's death could be seen as redemptive for the "first-born" of the "New" Israel. But such a sacrificial victim would have to have been without blemish, and this presupposes a sinless intimacy with God which has not pertained (with the possible exception of Enoch, the patriarchs, Moses and Elijah) between man and God

since Eden. John the Evangelist put words into the mouth of Jesus which promote the idea of a complete unity of wills (at the least) between God and His "Son", but the Christological tangles which these speeches have given rise –to bear witness to the difficulties involved: such a man would indeed have to be of a different order of reality to be indeed a fit sacrifice "without blemish", and participation through any rite in the death of such a victim leads again inevitably into magic.

What, then, is the meaning of baptism if not participation in the death of a perfect sacrificial victim? Undoubtedly, the ritual of John the Baptist was modeled on the cleansing of Naaman the Syrian, a leper and a gentile (2 *Kings* 5:1-14). In the manner of Elisha, John was offering a ritual cleansing to Jews who lived in gentile territories and who wished to enter the Holy Land via the Jordan (thereby avoiding Samaria) in order to be in a fit state to render their dues at the Jerusalem Temple. The equivalent survives in the *mikveh* (ritual bath) of *giyyur* – conversion to Judaism. This *does* make sense symbolically: the proselyte is re-born into a new, Jewish, identity – just as a Jewish baby is born through the waters of its Jewish mother's womb.

The earliest Christians were not entirely blameworthy for straying into their errors of interpretation. They fell victim to a fundamentalist kabbalistic theology which saw ritual impurity as demon-possession and the ingestion of non-*kosher* food as poisoning. This coloured their interpretation of the Fall and its consequences. A possible alternative view, which saw the body of a Jew as a microcosm of the Temple, did not gain purchase in the development of the mythos of Jesus (although see *John* 2:21). So, while modern Judaism has the option of illuminating its tradition with the rationality of a Moses Maimonides, the Christian narrative is trapped in the semi-magical obscurantism of a Moses Nachmanides. (And we should not forget that the legacy of this theology persisted in Christendom until modern times: the monarch who sanctioned the "authorized" version of the English Bible of 1611 also wrote a "Demonology".) The true heir of the Sinai covenant is not the Christian Church, whatever its theological shade, but a compassionate and therefore inclusive Judaism in which holiness and wholesomeness are the watchwords for all looking towards a restored Eden in the midst of which will be the Tree of Life. May the Messiah guide us to it when he comes.



THE EMPTY TOMB. SMIRKE

## APPENDIX



### THE WORD MADE FLESH PHILIPPE DE LOUTHERBOURG

The Prologue to John's Gospel continues to be seen through the refracting lens of Trinitarian doctrine, with "the Word" consistently capitalised to denote the pre-existent second person of the Trinity ("God the Son"). This has been applied in all modern English translations subsequent to Tyndale. Behind this Prologue there is, I believe, an account of the meaning and nature of Jesus in which a doctrine of emanations is used as a valid way of illuminating the relationship of the Supreme Being to the world. I have therefore composed a paraphrase of the opening to John's Gospel which spells out what I believe he intended to say, unaware of how his message would be later distorted by Christendom. Whether his Prologue may be deemed "gnostic" is a moot issue which I leave the reader to decide.

Words *about* Jesus must always be secondary to the words *of* Jesus. And Jesus's fundamental tenet is this: that those of the Light, who are the good and the just, will be saved, and that those of the darkness, the wicked and the unjust, will be destroyed, and mortal man cannot pre-empt that judgment.

In the Prologue to John's Gospel the doctrine of emanations allows for a description of how the Supreme Being relates to the material world – the spiritual and the material realms being different in kind.

Taking into account the wisdom literature of the Bible such as *Proverbs*. We find that there are two principal emanations from the Supreme Being: Wisdom, and the Word. Both of these (in mythological terms) are implicated in Matter through the process of creation. A higher emanation is Gnosis – the "Light" of John's Gospel (see *Psalms* 36:9) – which is of and remains of the spiritual realm after the creation, unsullied by Matter. If Mary the mother of Jesus is a manifestation of Wisdom, and Jesus himself is the Word made flesh, then the teaching of Jesus is Gnosis revealed as Word (or words). Whereas Wisdom and the Word are created – there was a time when they were not – the Light of Gnosis is uncreated. After the coming-into-being of Matter, Light is commanded to be in the world, where it remains uncontaminated by the Material. The Light made manifest in the teaching of the Word-made-flesh (not forgetting it is part of John's thesis that the Word reveals itself by the deeds of Jesus, as well as by his words) is recognised and apprehended by the branches of the vine – the Gnostics – and none other. Jesus's death is a Passover sacrifice that beckons the Gnostic back to the Light. It is this scheme of things which is explicated by John's Prologue, which is in effect a *mishnah* on the opening of *Genesis*. The Light of Gnosis is in fact the "spirit of God" which moved over the face of the waters of chaos at the beginning of all things.

#### JOHN'S GOSPEL: A PARAPHRASE OF THE PROLOGUE

*"In the beginning" was the Word, and the Word was with the Supreme Being, and the Word was: "God". The same was "in the beginning with the Supreme Being. All things were made by means of it, and without its means was not anything made that was made. In it was life, and life was the light of everyman. Meanwhile, the Light shines on in the darkness – the darkness did not overwhelm it.*

*There was a man sent from "God" whose name was "John". The same came for a witness, to bear witness to the Light, so that everyman might have the opportunity through John of apprehending it. He was not that Light, but was sent to bear witness to that Light – the true Light which can illumine each*

*man who comes into "the world" from beyond it. It was in "the world", and "the world" became an entity because of it, for "the world" did not know it. It came to its own, who, being illumined already, did not "receive" it; rather those who "received" it were in fact empowered as progeny of the Supreme Being, the ones who apprehended the true nature of "God", who were born not by the blood of circumcision or the urges of the flesh, or by any ordinance of man, but directly from the Supreme Being. Meanwhile, the Word was made flesh in word and deed, and dwelt among us, and we beheld its glory, the glory as of the only one actually begotten by "God" as "Father", overflowing with selflessness and truth.*

*John bore witness of it, and cried, saying, "This is the one of which I spoke, 'That which comes after me has priority over me, for it was before me.' And of its fullness has everyman received, generosity upon generosity. For the Law was given through Moses, but selfless-giving-itself and truth-itself came through Jesus, the Anointed One. No man has seen "God" at any time, but the only one actually begotten like a son who has complete access to the true nature of his father, he has shown "God" forth.*



THE LAMB OF GOD  
PHILIPPE DE LOUTHERBOURG

Phillip Medhurst was born in Leicester, England in 1948. Educated at Alderman Newton's Grammar School, he won an open scholarship to read English at Wadham College, Oxford. After graduation he trained for the Anglican ministry. On ordination he served in a South London parish while qualifying as a schoolteacher at Goldsmiths' College. For ten years Phillip pursued a career as a teacher in holy orders in both state-funded and private schools. After a brief spell as a chaplain at Malvern College, he spent another decade supervising the religious life of denominational schools in the West Midlands before retiring from schoolteaching to devote his time entirely to writing and fine art. Phillip's other publications include "Rammohun Roy: Monotheist-Philanthropist" "Walter Gilbert: The Romance in Metalwork", and "Gnostica", a selection of his poetry and prose. He currently divides his time between homes in Kidderminster and Rochdale.